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SUBJECT: NEWSPAPER REPORTS ON AIRLINE "TERRORIST" INCIDENT;
MPS PROVIDES MEAGER OFFICIAL RESPONSE

REF: A. OSC/FBIS CPP2008039968087
1B. OSC/FBIS CPP20080309968143
1C. OSC/FBIS CPP20080312701010
1D. BEIJING 892
1E. BEIJING 914
1F. OSC/FBIS CPP20080312715009
1G. OSC/FBIS CPP20080312968076

Summary

11. (SBU) The Global Times (Huanqiu Shibao), a newspaper run by the Communist Party's flagship People's Daily newspaper, described on March 11 how a 19 year-old "Uighur girl" smuggled gasoline contained in beverage cans onboard a China Southern flight from Urumqi to Beijing. The article claimed the girl's motive was to ignite the cans in the aircraft lavatory, but was subdued. The most detailed account of the incident appeared on a blog of a Chinese reporter from Southern Weekend, a popular national newspaper owned by the Guangdong CCP Committee. The Ministry of Public Security confirmed the basic details of the incident in a fax sent to the Embassy on March 12. Chinese media denounced claims by "foreign media and some so-called politicians and academics" that the incident was a hoax used as a pretext to taint the Uighur community. End Summary.

CCP Media on Foiled Attack

12. (SBU) Xinhua reported on March 9 that CCP Politburo Member and Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) Party Secretary Wang Lequan and XUAR Chairman (Governor-equivalent) Nur Bekri, on the margins of the ongoing National People's Congress, both said publicly that "some people were attempting to create an air disaster" but that the flight crew had foiled the attack. According to Xinhua, a China Southern flight to Beijing departed Urumqi on March 7 at 10:35 a.m. and landed in Lanzhou at 12:40 p.m. after the crew reported the incident to the control tower. Nur said the authorities are investigating "who the attackers are, where they come from and what their background is."

13. (SBU) The Global Times (Huanqiu Shibao), a newspaper run by the Communist Party's flagship People's Daily newspaper, published additional details on the incident in an article published March 11 (ref C). Quoting an unnamed "informed official source," the paper said a 19-year-old "Uighur girl" from Kuche in the XUAR tried "to destroy" a China Southern airliner flying from Urumqi to Beijing on March 7. The girl passed through the business class security checkpoint at Urumqi's Diwobao Airport, carrying a bottle of mineral water and two "ring-pull cans of beverages." Although the girl opened the water bottle and drank two mouthfuls at the

request of a security guard, the "young security checker" did not make the girl open the cans, which contained "absolutely not beverages but gasoline." "A tiny hole had been punched in the cans, and after the beverages had been drained out, they were filled with gasoline," the paper reported. To mask the smell, perfume was added. During the flight, the girl's "modus operandi" was to set the cans alight in the lavatory, but "by great good fortune," the girl's activity in the toilet was discovered. She was subdued and the plane made an emergency landing in Lanzhou.

¶4. (SBU) The most detailed account of the incident appeared on a blog of a Chinese reporter from Southern Weekend, a popular newspaper owned by the Guangdong CCP Committee. The reporter described how he used the Internet to track down a first-hand account of the incident from a passenger onboard the China Southern flight. The reporter published on his blog an email from a passenger using the name "Luckie." According to Luckie's account, after about an hour into the flight, a passenger complained to a flight attendant about the smell of gasoline. Luckie, seated in the rear of the Boeing 757, heard a quarrel and saw a Uighur woman "about 20 years old" standing. She had been seated in the fourth or fifth row on the right-side of the economy class cabin. A man, who Luckie presumed was a security agent, went over and subdued the woman. "There was no chaos. It was very calm," Luckie reported. At 12:46 p.m., the plane landed at Zhongchuan Airport in Lanzhou, Gansu Province. Luckie emailed periodic updates from the airport, describing the investigation. "Supposedly four cans of gasoline were found," Luckie wrote, and four "foreigners" believed to be "East Turkestan elements" detained. (The blog address is http://blog.infzm.com/space/?13722/action_viewspace_itemid_1574.html and translated at

BEIJING 00000930 002 OF 002

[http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20080311_1.htm.\)](http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20080311_1.htm.)

¶5. (SBU) The reporter noted in his blog that his story was never published "for reasons everybody knows about." (Note: According to a Hong Kong-based PRC media analyst, the reporter is probably referring to instructions from Propaganda authorities that would typically be issued following an incident of this nature banning publication.)

The PRC's Official Response

¶6. (SBU) The Ministry of Public Security, in response to Post's inquiries, confirmed the incident. In a five-sentence fax sent to Embassy Beijing's Legal Attaché on March 12, MPS said flight personnel on China Southern flight CZ6901 discovered a passenger with "suspicious liquids." "For the safety of the passengers, the plane made a safety landing in Lanzhou Zhongchuan Airport, all the passengers and flight crew were unharmed." "Relevant departments" continue to investigate the incident, the MPS fax stated. (Post emailed an unofficial translation of the MPS fax to EAP/CM.) When pressed for details, an MPS official referred us to the Global Times article.

¶7. (SBU) At the regular MFA press briefing on March 12 (ref D), spokesman Qin Gang, when asked about the incident, responded using points nearly identical to those mentioned in the MPS fax. FM Yang Jiechi described the incident similarly during a separate press briefing on the margins of the National People's Congress (ref E).

Motive Speculation

¶8. (SBU) The Global Times, quoting an "official source," said the 19-year-old girl's motive was "not to cause an uproar on account of unhappiness with society," but to "deliberately cause a terrorist incident." Li Wei, a counterterrorism expert from the Ministry of State Security-affiliated China

Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), stopped short of saying the girl's actions could have brought down the plane. Li told the paper that igniting the gasoline could have caused a fire or a "small explosion within the confined space of the aircraft cabin." China Southern's Managing Director Liu Shaoyong went further, claiming in an interview broadcast on Hong Kong Phoenix TV on March 11 (ref F) that "past incidents were commonly motivated by personal aims," while the recent incident "exhibits an obvious political agenda" targeting the Olympic Games, the work of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council and "China's territorial integrity, stability and unification." (Note: In his interview, Liu said the Uighur girl and a companion intended to store the flammable material in the lavatory trash bin and "activate it" at a "pre-determined moment.")

Human Rights and Human Bombs

¶9. (SBU) XUAR Chairman Nur Bekri reacted angrily to exiled Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer's claim that the incident was a hoax designed to smear her ethnic brethren (ref G). These are "irresponsible claims" by "foreign media and some so-called politicians and academics," he stated. "Any attack on a civilian aircraft should be considered a terrorist act," Bekri said, asking "how can you apply double standards to this?" A Chinese "expert on combating Xinjiang terrorism," quoted in the Global Times, said "hoodwinking a 19-year-old girl into becoming a human bomb fully exposes the cruelty and savagery of the terrorist organizations" who "always carryout their terrorist acts in the name of human rights" in order to gain Western support.

RANDT